



news from the

Department of Community and Human Services

alexandria community services board



July 2011

Volume 13, Issue 3

Kennedy and Moran at Mental Health Anti-Stigma Art Exhibit

Over 250 people came out for *Art Uniting People – Celebrating Creativity and Mental Health*, featuring guest speakers Congressman Jim Moran and Former U.S. Representative Patrick Kennedy. The exhibit showcased the artwork of 75 Northern Virginians whose lives have been affected by mental illness, substance dependency disorders and intellectual disabilities.

The exhibit provided the artists the opportunity to use art as a form of expression to engage the community in a conversation about mental health. Artists and viewers discussed the artwork and recognized universal feelings, thereby working to reduce the stigma often associated with mental disorders.

Moran spoke of the 1972 presidential election in which Tom Eagleton was dropped from the ticket following discovery of his treatment for depression. “Patrick Kennedy was five years old at the time,” said Moran, “and now, he can take credit for moving the nation forward with mental health parity and insuring that not only physical illness is deserving of insurance coverage, but mental illness, too.”

“Mental illness knows no party lines,” pronounced Kennedy. He recalled that following his hospitalization for bipolar disorder, he returned to thank the many U.S. Representatives who sent cards, and found they had harrowing stories of mental illness in their own families. Yet, these same colleagues voted against



*Self Portrait, Margaret Dowell-
“This painting shows someone
(me) with a mental illness who
is determined to play basketball
(or any other game) no matter
what- it’s about moving
beyond one’s limitations.”*

parity for fear people would find out that their wives were depressed or their daughters had anorexia.

“I got treatment for my brain just as I got treatment for the asthma in my lungs. If I had diabetes and ate chocolate cake, the media wouldn’t write anything,” said Kennedy.



*Jim Moran, Patrick Kennedy and
DCCHS Center Director Deborah Warren.*

“I am part of a family that has been trying to include more and more Americans in the American Dream. I grew up thinking that the great fights of social injustices had been fought and won, then I realized that the people in our families and who are our friends are marginalized because of mental illness,” proclaimed Kennedy.

Kennedy worked with top neuroscientists to launch the One Mind for Research initiative to investigate cures for brain diseases. Kennedy refers to this as a “moonshot into the mind.” He said, “The resources needed to put a man on the moon equal those needed to understand disorders of the brain, to understand why 18 military veterans commit suicide each day from post traumatic stress disorder. Soldiers are dying from the unintended consequences of war, and terrorists know this. These are combat wounds when they die five years later at their own hands.”

Kennedy emphasized, “We have to love them. We have to love everybody.” For more information about Kennedy’s current initiatives, visit moonshot.org.

This event was sponsored by the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria, the Alexandria CSB, the Alexandria Arts Commission and Friends of the Alexandria Mental Health Center with performances by the Rhythm of Hope Dance Company and refreshments provided by Alexandria Whole Foods Market and Best Buns.

A Caring Community Promoting Respect, Recovery, Hope

Project Connect Improves Health and Safety of Women & Children

The Alexandria Domestic Violence Program's Shelter received a six-month *Project Connect* grant to improve the health and safety of women and children.

To kick off the grant, the Shelter developed a Health Access Advisory Team (HAAT) to provide advice, feedback and community linkages. The HAAT comprised representatives of the Alexandria Health Department, Casey Clinic, CATCH, Inova Alexandria Hospital, Healthy Families and Arlandria Neighborhood Health Services (ANHSI). They developed a detailed health screening intake form for clients and identified areas where community partnerships could be developed. As a result, the Domestic Violence Program partnered with ANHSI, providing critical health services to Shelter clients.

The Project Connect grant enabled the Shelter to deliver a newly developed training on reproductive coercion to family planning and home visitor professionals. The training provides specific tools to these professionals who might be precisely the people with whom victims will share their concerns about sexual or reproductive coercion.

Project Connect also enabled the Shelter to promote healthy eating among residents. Through collaboration with the Alexandria Cooperative Extension Program, nutrition

workshops are held at the Shelter. A partnership was developed with a farmer from the Del Ray Farmer's Market whereby each Saturday, Three Way Farms donates fresh produce to the Shelter.



Through Project Connect, Domestic Violence Shelter residents are encouraged to eat fresh produce donated to the Shelter.

Also as part of Project Connect, an internal health resources guide was created for the staff; give away items displaying the domestic violence and sexual assault hotline numbers were purchased; health policy and protocols were developed for the shelter; and brochures and posters on reproductive coercion were distributed to family planning providers and home visitors. The Alexandria Domestic Violence staff will continue to enhance the Project Connect partnerships and offer additional training on reproductive coercion to the community.

Personal Discovery and Relationships on the Road to Recovery

When Beth entered Alexandria Detox in 2005, she was addicted to heroin and crack. Counselors recognized her dual diagnosis of addiction and mental illness (post-traumatic stress disorder and depression). "My disease stemmed from childhood molestation and rape. When I was 16 and lost my mom, it was my first funeral. I stared at her in the casket waiting for her to wake up," Beth said tearfully. She began seeing a therapist and psychiatrist while in Detox.

Not uncommon during recovery, Beth relapsed a year later. The following year she landed in the Alexandria jail on a warrant where she joined the jail's Sober Living Unit. Upon release in 2007, Beth moved to a recovery group home and resumed outpatient therapy where she began working with therapist Omayra Hunt. Omayra explained, "We worked



through her traumatic memories and practiced skills to regulate emotions."

Beth said, "I was always told I wouldn't amount to anything and I'd be in and out of prison like my

brother. I was blamed for my mom's death. I dropped out of school in the ninth grade, started, quit and cycled." In therapy, Beth came to know that her mom's death wasn't her fault, "she had a bad heart." "Omayra helped me through the past, the death and the molestation, to deal with it. Today I don't break down and cry and wish things were different. I've gotten acceptance." Beth began making healthy connections with other people in her life through group meetings and a sponsor.

Then, Beth was unfairly laid off from her job. "My mind went blank so I didn't even know where I was." In a stupor, that day she managed to go to New Jersey to see family where she was struck by the death of her dear and supportive aunt, just hours before. "I knew if I didn't pick up and use that day, God had something in store for me."

Beth decided to pursue her GED. She excelled on the pre-test and found she didn't need prep classes. Beth passed the GED exam immediately. "Throughout my addiction I forgot I was smart. My family always said I did my homework and they would say 'she's smart, she's not stopping here.' I also always wanted to help others as either a nurse or a lawyer."

Beth completed therapy in 2009. As Omayra explains, "The symptoms of trauma can resurface because the memories stay, and when this happens, I can help her manage the emotions." Last year, during a difficult time, Beth returned to therapy for support. (cont. on page 3)

Excellence in Aging Award Winners

Two Alexandria residents, an organization and two taxi drivers were recognized by the Commission on Aging for their efforts in enhancing the lives of seniors in Alexandria.

Amber Kim Dewey received the Lois Van Valkenburg Excellence in Aging Award for an Individual for outstanding contributions to elevating the quality of life for older adults in Alexandria within the past year.

Dewey volunteers at St. Martin de Porres Senior Center in Alexandria. She has served as social volunteer, leading activities at the Center, and building enriching relationships with the seniors. As a new mother, she has provided intergenerational celebrations and interactions between the seniors and her growing son, and as a Master Gardener, she has led various gardening projects to engage and help provide food for seniors at the Center.

Bill Harris received the Annie B. Rose Lifetime Achievement Award for exemplary accomplishments that have been devoted to advancing social justice and aging concerns. In 1991, Harris became a voice in Alexandria for older residents. He has articulated the needs of seniors for increased transportation, housing and Meals on Wheels, and has succeeded in obtaining greater City support for these programs.

At age 82, Harris volunteers to rebuild homes of older low-income homeowners through Rebuilding Together and represents Alexandria's First Baptist Church on the ALIVE! Board for which he coordinates the church's semi-annual food donations. He also drives an ALIVE! food truck and is a member of their audit committee. During his tenure as Chair of the Commission on Aging, he initiated a successful effort to obtain City Council's approval to develop a strategic plan to make Alexandria a livable community for all ages.

Jean Yeboah and Zaheer Ahmad received the Senior Taxi Driver Award that recognizes taxi drivers for compassionate and courteous service to seniors. Yeboah immigrated to the United States in 1984 from Ghana and has been working for Alexandria Yellow Cab since 1987. One of Yeboah's greatest enjoyments comes from visiting with the seniors as he transports them around the City. Last year Yeboah logged more than 200 senior trips.

Ahmad has been driving for Alexandria Yellow Cab since 2001 after emigrating from Pakistan to the U.S. in 1999. He enjoys transporting the seniors because they remind him of his parents who live in Pakistan, and he strives to treat his riders the way he would treat his parents – with kindness and respect.

The **Zeta Chi Omega Chapter** of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority received the Excellence in Aging Award for an Organization. This award identifies and recognizes an organization that has made outstanding contributions to elevating the quality of life for older residents.

A service organization with the mantra, "Service to All Mankind," Zeta Chi Omega has hosted a holiday social for seniors for more than 15 years. The event, which offers music, entertainment, games, arts and crafts, and informational services for the elderly, has grown to serve more than 250 seniors. Each of the 278 chapter members participates.



*Amber Dewey and
Mayor William D. Euille.*



Bill Harris and Mayor Euille.



Zaheer Ahmad and Mayor Euille.



*Zeta Chi Omega with the Mayor and
members of Council.*

Recovery (cont.)

Omayra said, "Recovery is a process and there will be times when people come close to relapsing. Beth can learn to recognize these times, and plan what she will do to recover."

Beth recently achieved a NOVA certificate as a Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Counselor, Magna Cum Laude. She was admitted to Argosy University where she is beginning classes for a bachelor's in psychology. "Omayra gave me the 'umph' to keep going in school, to keep going in life. She's helping me develop plans to handle stress so I don't relapse. She cares."

Beth has been clean since 2007. She has built a relationship with her adult daughter, who was raised by the paternal grandmother, and her six year-old grandson. Beth gleamed, "He doesn't know about my past and he adores me. I was never there for my daughter. I don't want to mess this up. Now I have a second grandchild. It helps me keep my focus."



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Chinese Delegation Visits Alexandria

A delegation of 12 human services professionals from China visited Alexandria recently to learn how the City handles various issues. After spending the morning at Planning and Zoning, the group came to the Department of Community and Human Services to learn about social service and behavioral health programs.

Department Director Mike Gilmore talked about mental health programs; Suzanne Chis, Deputy Director of the Department, discussed programs that benefit children and families; Carol Layer, Acting Director of the Center for Adult Services, explained services for adults and older residents; and Dennis McKinney, Acting Director of the Center for Economic Support, listed the financial benefits and employment programs that make up the social safety net for persons at risk of falling into poverty.

The interpreter for the group indicated that many of the services and entitlements that persons in the United States receive, do not exist in China.



Mike Gilmore shares copies of the DCHS organizational chart with the Chinese delegation.

To make comments or suggestions for story ideas, contact Jennifer Cohen at 703.746.3484 or jennifer.cohen@alexandriava.gov.
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